Staff

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Louis Sterrett

COPY EDITORS
Gabriel Almeida
Mike Bartlett
Rory Hannigan
Thom Hutchinson
Stanley Sharpey
Patrick Unwin

DESIGNERS
Mike Atkinson
Chris Mansour

WEB EDITOR
Evan Odell

SOCIAL MEDIA EDITORS
Gabe Gottfried

DISTRIBUTION
Erica Gamble

Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes Leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of Leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines
Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to editor.platypusreview@gmail.com. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

The *Platypus Review* is funded by:
The University of Chicago Student Government
Dalhousie Student Union
Loyola University of Chicago
School of the Art Institute of Chicago Student Government
The New School
New York University
The University of Illinois at Chicago
The Platypus Affiliated Society

About the Platypus Affiliated Society
The Platypus Affiliated Society, established in December 2006, organizes reading groups, public fora, research and journalism focused on problems and tasks inherited from the "Old" (1920s–30s), "New" (1960s–70s) and post-political (1980s–90s) Left for the possibilities of emancipatory politics today.

The Platypus Review

Issue 160 | October 2023

1 **An interview with Lars T. Lih on Kautsky, Lenin, and Trotsky**
Efraim Carlebach and D. L. Jacobs

3 **The birth of the Weimar Republic**
A review of *Eduard Bernstein on the German Revolution*
William Smaldone

platypus1917.org

160

An interview with Lars T. Lih on Kautsky, Lenin, and Trotsky

Efraim Carlebach and D. L. Jacobs

On July 22, 2023, Platypus Affiliated Society members Efraim Carlebach and D. L. Jacobs interviewed Lars T. Lih, the author of Bread and Authority in Russia: 1914–1921 *(1990),* Lenin Rediscovered: *What is to be Done?* in Context *(2006),* Lenin *(2011), and the forthcoming* What was Bolshevism?. *An edited transcript follows.*

D. L. Jacobs: How did you become interested in Marxism and when were you politicized?

Lars T. Lih: There's never been a time when I wasn't politicized. My degrees were in political science, and I worked in the congressional office of Ron Dellums from Oakland, a Leftist and member of the Democratic Party in Congress at the time, from 1971 to 77. But I've never been in a party. So how did I get interested in the revolutionary movement? I was always interested in Marx and Russia, trying to find out what was going on there. You could say that growing up in a small town in Cold War America, Russia was always an object of fear and fascination.

Efraim Carlebach: You were studying in 1968 at a time of great ferment on the Left. Did you identify as a Marxist in your own politics?

LTL: There was a lot of ferment, and I learned a lot. Marx himself was going through one of his periodic "rediscoveries," this time mainly because of his early writings. I'm not sure I would ever say I was a Marxist in the full or exclusive sense of the word. I have written about Hobbes, who also provides key insights into basic questions of the Russian Revolution. My own political activity is unremarkable.

EC: How would you characterize your politics?

LTL: I try to keep that separate. People who study the Russian Revolution have a great temptation, a drive, to get lessons from it for today. I have nothing against that, but as someone investigating it, I would be more helpful to academics and to activists alike if I keep myself focused on what happened.

EC: How did you come to write *Lenin Rediscovered*?

LTL: My PhD book was *Bread and Authority in Russia, 1914–1921*. That got me into an academic interest in what I call the myth of War Communism. The portrayal of the Bolsheviks during that period was so off that my next step was to uncover what the Bolsheviks were actually doing. My forthcoming book has the title *What Was Bolshevism?*, and this is the question I have been asking myself since the early 1990s. From the beginning, I wanted to decenter Lenin. Partly because his writings are available in so many languages, it is easy to focus exclusively on him. I looked at the other top leaders, the often overlooked ones: Kamenev, Zinoviev, and even Stalin as a young Bolshevik.

So how do I deal with Lenin? Everyone at the time told the standard story that *What is to be Done?* (1902) shows that he looked down on the workers. This was called "the worry about workers." I should mention that my teacher Robert Tucker, who edited the anthologies of Lenin and Marx and Engels, had a different view of Lenin, close to what I think is correct. He put me on the path for this issue. I thought that I would write a paragraph or one chapter just to dismiss the standard view.

Then Sebastian Budgen of Historical Materialism invited me to do a new translation of *What is to be Done?*. I soon found out how little this famous book had been studied. In fact, it was hard to find a short but comprehensive statement of the argument, chapter by chapter. So, I had to do a giant book because it was essentially an untouched topic. Studies of the period were not about Lenin's actual argument or the concepts. Social historians had written valuable books, but they did not answer the questions I had.

My basic research method was to read just about everything Lenin mentioned in his polemical book. He is always arguing with someone. While he has his own thesis, he is always responding to something. That is how his mind worked. It's striking how little in his oeuvre he sits down just to expound his basic principles without polemics.

DLJ: What contributed to what you call the "textbook" interpretation of Lenin in the 20th century?

LTL: I wrote an article, "How a Founding Document Was Found, or One Hundred Years of Lenin's *What is to Be Done?*," trying to explain that story.[1] (There are some important mistakes in that article, so I recommend only with caution.) Lenin's book made a big splash at the time it was published in 1902, but it focused on problems that quickly became irrelevant, mainly because of the 1905 Russian Revolution. He was advocating ways to get the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party going as a real political force in Russia. Well, it did get going — and that fact made the book irrelevant. He republished his book in 1907 or 08 as part of his collected writings, and wrote in the preface that to understand this book, you had to understand the concepts of the time. In the 1920s someone referred to *What is to be Done?* and just said, "I thought it was very interesting." Up to that time and afterwards it was regarded as an important book, but not as something earth-shattering or an innovation.

When did it become that? It is in the Cold War context. I refer to the "Wolfe pack," after Bertram D. Wolfe's *Three Who Made a Revolution* (1948). Then there was an influential comparative politics textbook for which Adam Ulam wrote the Russia section. He said, "If you want to understand Khrushchev today, read *What is to be Done?*." That was literally a *textbook* version, and a whole generation in political science got their understanding of *What is to Be Done?* and Lenin from that book. No one was taking the time to look carefully at the book and its context.

The textbook interpretation fit the Cold War. I don't mean simply that Wolfe and Ulam were polemicizing against the Soviet Union. Their version of Lenin's argument made sense for them at the time. The Communist Party USA was on the margin. Many of them were Jewish intellectuals in the big cities. The Party didn't get a big following from the working class. They were very much under the control of the Soviet Union. If that was your image of the Communist Party — the Party in the Soviet Union was also centralized and dictatorial — the textbook interpretation felt natural. But it had zilch to do with what Lenin was talking about. My point in *Lenin Rediscovered* was to show that it was a completely different world with different expectations and views. Lenin was not pessimistic. He was not looking down on the workers; he saw them as a messiah class. I quote Zinoviev saying something like, "We were accused in the early 1900s of regarding the workers as the messiah class. That's not our language, but yes, we think the workers will save the world." The essence of my book was to get myself into the world of these people and locate them within it.

EC: You also identify the textbook interpretation with not only Cold War academics but Trotskyism. In *Lenin Rediscovered* you write,

> The textbook interpretation is thus, on the whole, a postwar creation. One reason for its rise is a great forgetting of what prewar international Social Democracy was all about. The principal reason for this loss of context is the watershed of the 1917 revolution, which split prewar Social Democracy in two and gave the name 'Social Democracy' only to the more moderate side. On the Left, a number of writers with no or very shallow roots in the Second International — Georg Lukács, Antonio Gramsci, Karl Korsch — created a theory (*not* shared by Lenin) that Leninism was the principled rejection of the fatalistic Marxism of the Second International and of Kautsky in particular. In my view, the insistence on seeing a great gulf between Kautsky on the one hand and Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky on the other has condemned those in the postwar Trotskyist tradition to a deep misunderstanding of their own heroes.[2]

What is the significance of that break?

LTL: First, Trotsky was involved in the polemics at the time *What is to be Done?* was written. Later, he more or less said Lenin went too far but recognized his own mistakes. He never had the idea that this book was a great breakthrough. I disagree with Trotsky about *What is to be Done?*, but he himself did not make the "textbook" mistake.

Lukács and others made up this Lenin-Kautsky contrast. There are reasons for that contrast. Even more important in making that contrast is Stalin's *Foundations of Leninism* (1924). Kautsky was a problem for the Bolsheviks. Kautsky had sided with the Bolsheviks on key questions prior to 1914. You can see in Lenin or Stalin tons of compliments and expressions of pride that the great Kautsky was on their side. Then Kautsky became the number one renegade. After 1917, he became a foe of the Soviet enterprise. How did they handle that? Lenin said Kautsky was a great guy in the past, but he went down a dark path; looking back (Lenin said many times), we can see some weaknesses here and there, but we still think what he wrote then was great. This view is more intellectually honest. Stalin also thought this way, but he was writing for people who didn't know Kautsky, because they were new to the Revolution.

Before the war, Russian Bolsheviks and activists read Kautsky more than any other author. Kautsky was where they got their overall worldview (remember my earlier comment that Lenin himself did not write this kind of book). Lenin saw Bolshevism as the Russian chapter of revolutionary Social Democracy, the Left-wing of the Second International. "Revolutionary Social Democrat" was used as a title through 1917; only in 1918 did they replace it with "Communist," and "Social Democrat" became a term of abuse. Before the war, Lenin often said something like, "There is a split between Right and Left in every country. We Bolsheviks are part of this Left wing that includes Kautsky in Germany and Jules Guesde in France. Kautsky himself may go the wrong way but revolutionary Social Democracy will never die."

Stalin portrayed Lenin as a great innovator of the Left, opposed to the Second International as a whole. Instead of having opportunists within Social Democracy — an internal conflict — you had Lenin versus all of Social Democracy. Stalin's *Foundations of Leninism* is structured around this contrast between Lenin and the Second International. Kautsky now becomes the spokesman for the entire Second International. Stalin is more important in creating that new outlook than I had realized. It is a paradox that this includes the Trotskyist tradition — not Trotsky himself — which owes a fair amount to the Soviet way of looking at things.

The birth of the Weimar Republic

A review of *Eduard Bernstein on the German Revolution*

William Smaldone

Eduard Bernstein on the German Revolution: Selected Historical Writings, ed. Marius S. Ostrowski (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

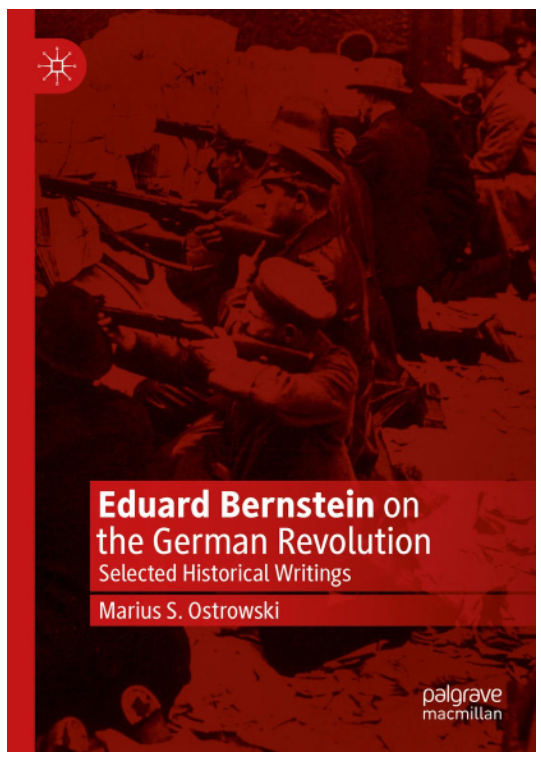
THE DEEPENING CRISIS OF CAPITALISM in the early 21st century is shaking the system's ideological foundations to the core. The economic collapse of 2008, the intensifying environmental crisis, growing domestic and global inequality, economic and ecological displacement of millions of refugees, and the social impacts of the COVID-19 epidemic have undermined the faith of many — especially among the young — in neoliberal capitalism and led them to question whether a system predicated on perpetual growth is compatible with human survival. Interest in alternatives to capitalism is on the rise, even in the United States, still the heart of the global system. While many Americans, furious about social and ideological changes they cannot control, have moved to the far Right and embraced such political figures as Donald Trump, others have turned to the radical Left exemplified by the rapid growth the Democratic Socialists of America, which, between 2016 and 2023 has increased its membership from roughly 6,000 to 77,000 and now exerts substantial influence in U.S. political discourse.

The renewed interest in "socialism" has stimulated plenty of debate about what this term means in a 21st-century context, and that discussion, of course, requires knowledge of socialist history about which most people in the United States know little. Many Americans still associate "socialism" with Soviet "communism" and are ignorant about the powerful democratic socialist movements that have shaped politics in advanced, as well as developing, countries around the world. That is why Marius Ostrowski's able translation of Eduard Bernstein's works on the German Revolution of 1918–19 is so important. Bernstein (1850–1932) was one of the German Social Democratic Party's (SPD)[1] most important thinkers from the early 1880s until his death in 1932. After joining the fledgling SPD in the mid-1870s, Bernstein went into Swiss exile during the anti-socialist repression of the 1880s, edited the Party's flagship newspaper *Der Sozialdemokrat* for ten years from Zürich, and eventually settled in England. He knew Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels personally, subscribed to their ideas and, after their deaths, became the executor of their literary estate. After the relegalization of the SPD in 1890, he co-authored, with Karl Kautsky, the Party's radical Erfurt Program of 1891, which became a model for socialist parties throughout Europe. By the late 1890s, however, Bernstein began to question some of Marx's major theoretical premises, such as the efficacy of the labor theory of value, the increasing immiseration of the proletariat, and the decline of the middle classes. His explosive book *Evolutionary Socialism*, published in 1899, urged German socialists — who had by far the largest and best organized socialist movement at that time — to drop their "revolutionary" rhetoric and to strive for socialism via the winning of parliamentary majorities that could then introduce socialist reforms to gradually transform society. Bernstein thereby became the father of "revisionism," a viewpoint that led to heated debates within the movement. In the face of sharp criticisms by Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg, Rudolf Hilferding, and many others, Bernstein's views won only minority support among socialists prior to 1914, but his influence grew. After the collapse of the German Empire and the founding of the republic in 1918, his gradualist outlook predominated.

Bernstein's role has been much discussed in the history of the labor movement, especially by politicians and historians seeking to lay the blame for Social Democracy's failure to resist the outbreak of the First World War and the subsequent collapse of the international labor movement at revisionism's door. His reputation has largely been colored by the criticisms of his political opponents, especially such passionate and skilled polemicists as Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin, who condemned him and his followers as "opportunists" who undermined the ideological unity of the labor movement and weakened its revolutionary resolve. Bolshevism's victory in Russia and Weimar's collapse in 1933 ultimately led to the predominance of Lenin's outlook among many on the socialist Left. This is unfortunate, whatever one thinks of Bernstein's theoretical and practical ideas, because it has narrowed the focus of interest on Bernstein's role as a thinker and politician to the pre-1914 period and diverted attention from his later writings and activities. Ostrowski's translations of Bernstein's writings on the German Revolution are designed to broaden that view.

Ostrowski divides his work into three main parts. Part I consists of Bernstein's history of the German Revolution, which was one of the first studies of that upheaval to be published in the early Weimar period. Part II looks back at the Revolution of 1848. Titled "How a Revolution Perished," it aims to discuss that event's lessons for republican revolutionaries in the 1920s. Part III provides a selection of Bernstein's articles dealing primarily with the division of the German labor movement, his critique of Bolshevism, and his concern that social democrats be prepared to actually govern their new parliamentary state. Taken together, these writings provide readers with a clear sense of the man as a political thinker and a fair-minded historian whose views on the role of a socialist party within a parliamentary state remain of interest today.

In "The German Revolution," Bernstein does not assume the role of the "objective historian" operating above the fray. During the War he was active in the anti-war opposition within the SPD and later joined with other dissidents, including Kautsky and Luxemburg, to form the Independent German Social Democratic Party (USPD)[2] in 1917. Although he rejoined the SPD in December of 1918, he remained a member of the USPD until that party banned dual memberships a few months later. The SPD-USPD coalition government appointed him to a post in the Treasury Department, and in 1920 he was elected to the Reichstag where he served until his retirement in 1928. Bernstein makes clear that, while the historian should not "arbitrarily meddle with facts for the sake of the writer's partisan position," he did not think this prohibited him from "expressing [his] individual verdict on events." For him, the core of the revolutionary story was about "a contest between two fundamentally different perceptions of socialism and social development," i.e., the contest between Social Democracy and Bolshevism. While on the surface this competition was manifest in the tactics advocated by the two movements, Bernstein aimed to "ascertain the deeper contradictions that underpin these practical struggles" (36).



The cover of *Eduard Bernstein on the German Revolution*

Bernstein traces the unfolding of the revolution from the overthrow of the imperial government in November 1918 to the convening of the National Assembly in February 1919. He describes not only the action in Berlin but also looks closely at the provinces, especially important states like Bavaria. For him the greatest achievement of the revolutionary workers and soldiers' councils was the destruction of the monarchy which opened the way for the creation of a parliamentary republic. Despite the deep wounds caused by Social Democracy's wartime split, he regarded the formation of the provisional SPD-USPD coalition government as a prelude to socialist reunification. That was essential, he believed, if the movement was to win a majority in parliament and undertake the gradual socialist transformation of the country.

Bernstein saw the revolutionary workers and soldiers' councils as transitional institutions that would oversee the work of the provisional government in democratizing the polity (e.g., via universal suffrage), ending the war, restoring the economy, which he assumed would include beginning the socialization of key industrial sectors, and fending off counterrevolution. The councils might later function as representative bodies within economic enterprises, but he did not think that, as in Bolshevik Russia, the new republic should only enfranchise proletarians while denying capitalists, artisans, peasants, and independent professional people their full rights as citizens. Such an exclusionary policy, he believed, could only lead to civil war and economic ruin, not socialism. Therefore, he strongly opposed his erstwhile USPD comrades, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, who, as leaders of the small Spartacus League[3] (later renamed the German Communist Party[4]) demanded the creation of a councilor republic following the Bolshevik model. In his view, the so-called "dictatorship of the proletariat" in Russia, which the Bolsheviks now wished to export to Germany, was nothing more than the dictatorship by a single party enforced by violence and terror. The Bolsheviks had jettisoned Marx's theoretical assumption that socialist revolution could only realistically occur in industrially advanced countries where the proletariat formed the majority of the population and was politically prepared to take power. Instead, they were attempting to build socialism in a backward peasant country against the wishes of the vast majority. Their actions had precipitated civil war, wrecked the economy, and created a system that was the farthest thing from socialism. Therefore, despite making many mistakes, the SPD was right to suppress the Spartacists and their allies when they attempted an armed rebellion in Berlin in early January of 1919.

To Bernstein, it was not surprising that the workers and soldiers' councils were dominated by workers' loyal to the SPD rather than the Spartacists. After 40 years of social democratic "schooling" in which the achievement of political democracy had always equated the creation of a democratic, parliamentary republic, it was natural that organized workers would side with their long-time socialist leaders. He is also careful to point out the problems of ascribing certain attitudes and behaviors to whole social groups. Neither the proletariat nor the bourgeoisie were homogenous social formations and at no time before or after the revolution did Social Democracy ever win the support of even half of the working class. He believed that, to win and hold power it would have to do better among the workers, but it would also have to appeal to other social and political groups, e.g., middle class liberals, whose interests sometimes aligned with those of labor. Such coalition politics and the political compromises they entailed became necessary when the SPD and USPD failed to win a socialist majority in the National Assembly. That experience, which led to the creation of a constitution that was progressive but not socialist, presaged the future of republican politics under Weimar.

Bernstein's appraisal of the Revolution's outstanding figures is clearly much more sympathetic to those of the SPD, such as Friedrich Ebert, who, as chairman of the new provisional government pursued moderate political and economic policies designed to stabilize the new republic and who was responsible for using the army to crush unrest in the capital. He was much more critical of the Left-wing of the USPD and especially of the Spartacists and their leaders Luxemburg and Liebknecht. While Bernstein praised both of them for their political and intellectual talents, he disdained their radical politics, which, he argued, like Bolshevik doctrine, were "Marxist in language" but "Blanquist in character" (60). Instead of working to consolidate the foundations of the republic, they pursued goals that were detached from German realities and drew only the support of a small minority. Bernstein was appalled at their murder at the hands of the military, but he believed that Liebknecht's "egotism" and "overestimation of his power over the masses" had led him onto a disastrous political path. And while Bernstein admired Luxemburg as "a selfless campaigner for an idea to which she had dedicated her entire being," he concluded that she, too, had erred in her assessment of the capacity of the revolution. Tragically, her actions contributed to a resurgence of the militarism she so deplored (258–59).

Until the end of his life, Bernstein considered himself to be a student of Marx despite his criticisms of the master. Like other leading thinkers of the Second International, he associated the emergence of socialism with the development of a rising proletariat in the context of advanced industrial capitalism, a proletariat prepared by the labor movement for the taking of power. For him, as for Marx and Engels, the democratic republic was the most propitious terrain for the unfolding of the struggle for socialism, and the creation of the Weimar Republic, despite its many difficulties, now provided the framework to undertake that task.

Parts II and III of Ostrowski's collection serve to underpin many of the themes raised in "The German Revolution." Bernstein is particularly concerned with the struggle against Bolshevism and its German counterpart, the reunification of the divided socialist movement, the emergence of Right-wing counterrevolution, and the necessity for Social Democrats to cooperate with liberal allies in the governance of the new "civic republic" on its way to becoming a workers' republic. The victory of Nazism and the collapse of the republic in 1933 spectacularly illustrated the limits of this parliamentary project.

Parliamentary socialism did not disappear, however. Following the defeat of Nazi Germany, it revived in Western Europe and elsewhere and was associated with the creation of the social-democratic welfare state. Aiming to "tame" rather than "abolish" capitalism, it was this model that much of the Left saw as a viable alternative to Soviet-style communism until the demise of the latter in the late 1980s. With the dissolution of the Soviet system, the social-democratic model itself came under attack as capital reasserted its power over labor, neoliberal ideology became ascendent, and it seemed to some, such as Francis Fukuyama, that history had "ended."

But history, of course, continued as capitalism's contradictions deepened and manifested themselves in multiple crises and intensifying social and political struggles. A century after Bernstein completed his history of the German Revolution, many of the issues he described remain at the forefront of socialist politics. Questions concerning the nature of the socialist constituency, the forms of struggle — parliamentary or otherwise — socialist movements should adopt, and the content of socialist policy remain central concerns as the Left attempts to grapple with short- and long-term responses to what is becoming an existential crisis for humanity. Bernstein's writings not only provide a useful and interesting perspective on one of the most important revolutions of 20th-century European history, but they also are an important starting point for thinking about approaches to socialist strategy today. **|P**

[1] Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands.

[2] Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands.

[3] Spartakusbund.

[4] Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands.

"An interview with Lars T. Lih," cont. from page 2

will comply? No, they did not. Kamenev and Stalin said, "This is a counter-revolution. They are class enemies. We are moving away from them and they from us, and the workers will inevitably soon find out what they really are." Lenin had been fighting what he called "Kautskyism" in Europe for a couple of years, and part of his polemic was about "demands." For this reason, he overreacted to the use of that word when he encountered it in *Pravda*. But he began to understand that his Bolshevik comrades were using it in a different sense; they were using "demands" as an agitational tool to *expose* the government.

People like Tsereteli and the revolutionary defensists said, "We have an agreement with the Provisional Government, and they will carry out our demands." That was what Lenin didn't like: the illusory hope that the workers and soldiers could get their program accomplished simply by making demands. There is another way of making demands: to expose the fact that the Provisional Government is counter-revolutionary and would never carry out the demands. Kamenev called it an agitational tool. Kamenev's remark was important for me for grasping the issues at stake. In the April debates when he opposed Lenin, he wasn't being apologetic or making excuses; he was explaining his opposition. Long before the war, Kamenev had written articles about the fact that Milyukov, Guchkov, and the like were essentially imperialist. It would be peculiar if in 1917 Kamenev suddenly thought they were turning into good revolutionaries. According to Kamenev, if he demanded that the government publish the secret treaties, it certainly was not going to do it, so that making this demand was a way to clarify to people not only that the Provisional Government was bad, but that they needed to replace it with a government that would publish the secret treaties, etc. It was a way of accomplishing Soviet power and getting rid of the Provisional Government. Other Bolsheviks — Sergei Bagdatev especially — said that you can't go out there and not make demands; you can't address a factory rally without making a demand for the government to do this or that; it was not practical. Essentially, the practical point of view, the view of the so-called *praktiki*, won out. Lenin didn't like this outcome, but he accepted it.

DLJ: In *Lessons of October*, Trotsky mentions that when Lenin came back to Russia in 1917, he swung too far Left and was too far ahead, and he pulled back in May, June, and July. Lenin did not just find resistance in the Party. In the famous line, he said they must "patiently explain." *Lessons of October* seems to be the account that influences later activism in the 20th century. In that sense it sounds like Trotsky agrees with what you're saying: that Lenin had to tone down some of these things for practical reasons. For example, you couldn't just say "down with the power." Do you agree with that part of *Lessons of October* and not others?

LTL: *Lessons of October* is pretty much wrong all the way through. In the article I published on Nevsky, I quote Trotsky saying that the party congress was a debate on whether to take power. That is not true. They were all aiming at taking power.

There is a quote from Lenin in 1921, which I hope to make familiar. It's not the only place he said this, but it is the best one. He was talking to some foreign communists. He said that when he came back in 1917, he realized that he and Zinoviev (who traveled with him) had misjudged the situation in Russia. he called for patience and explanations and for people to calm down. He understood that the émigrés coming from afar hadn't realized that the picture was different from what they had thought, and they had to slow down. We had all — me included — thought that this meant Lenin was criticizing Kamenev, Stalin, and the Right. But his criticism was of what we might call the Left Bolsheviks. It's right there in the April Theses if you look for it. The reason for it was the shock of finding themselves in the minority. On the eve of the War and during the War, the Bolsheviks were the leading party; they were routing the Mensheviks and the liquidationists, etc. Suddenly they found they were not the revolutionary party. They had miscalculated that. How would they react? They reacted by saying that people were being too impatient. That was Lenin's criticism; that was what he found at the assembly. They were trying to overthrow the government right away. But Lenin said they couldn't overthrow the government in the name of Soviet power if they didn't have a majority in the Soviets. How could they install Soviet power against the Soviets? It was a paradox. It took a while to get the great slogan "all power to the Soviets," which only occurred a month after Lenin came back. The surprising thing is — it almost sounds crazy — that in disputes between Kamenev or Stalin and the hotheads who wanted to move too fast, Lenin sided with Kamenev and Stalin. He didn't like the word "demands," but there is no proof that he was upset with *Pravda*'s editorial board at this time.

DLJ: It's like threading a needle. In "The Dual Power," Lenin says they are not Blanquists.[20] In other words, not to say they were coming to power right then because they had to win a majority, but he also says there was a closing window of opportunity. There was a split in Germany, and sailors were mutinying. Lenin was worried about an imperialist peace. Kamenev and Stalin were maybe not defensists, but he was worried that in practice they were — perhaps this is Trotsky's word — conciliatory.

LTL: "Conciliatory" is one of the translations of "agreement" that I abominate, not only in Trotsky. "Agreement" can be translated as "compromise" or "conciliation." Both are terrible for different reasons. Besides translation problems, I will state that Kamenev and Stalin were never "agreementizers" (the caustic Bolshevik word for pro-"agreement" socialists).

DLJ: Trotsky writes at the end of *Lessons of October* that he is not saying that Kamenev and Stalin are bad people, but that in a revolution there will be inertia, with a conservative part maintaining

the stability of the party. Lenin and Trotsky were trying to make sense of whether that lesson about revolution was embodied in people. It's like the point you make about Kautsky. Maybe Lenin and Kautsky agreed on all sorts of things about the state, but how did Lenin feel Kautsky's writings were being politically used in the period of 1914 to 1921?

LTL: Lenin argued that Kautsky's prewar writings favored the Bolsheviks, in contrast to Kautsky's post-1914 writings.

We were talking about the spring of 1917, but what you said about a window of opportunity makes more sense in the fall. Events moved much faster than anyone thought they would. They originally thought they would have to wait maybe a year or several years, along the lines of the 1905 Revolution. Not even the most optimistic people thought they would be in power within eight months.

What you said about Kamenev and Stalin being semi-defensists in March is just not true. They did say that they would not advocate anyone putting down their rifles and going home. But Lenin said the same things when he got back. Lenin specifically mentions that as part of his new understanding after his arrival, there was what he called "honest defensism," and the Bolsheviks had to accommodate this mass outlook. Otherwise, it would have been political suicide. Lenin and the Bolsheviks went out of their way to say soldiers should follow orders, stay in the war, and not simply put their bayonet in the ground and go home. He wanted to make the Bolshevik message understandable and comprehensible to avoid alienating support in the army. He even bragged about the fact that some of the most Bolshevik-tinged regiments fought better in the offensive. This point was made long ago by Hal Draper in his article "The Myth of Lenin's 'Revolutionary Defeatism,'" which is still one of the best studies written on the topic.[21]

People try to connect the dots between April and October. They say, here's Kamenev opposing Lenin in April, and here's Kamenev opposing Lenin in October — it must be for the same reasons; it must be that Kamenev always opposed Lenin. This was Rabinowitch's neo-Trotskyist reading, that there existed fundamental differences in outlook between Kamenev and Lenin. But this way of connecting the dots runs into the problem that Zinoviev was on Lenin's side in April and criticized Kamenev. Since Zinoviev and Kamenev were allies in the fall of 1917, you can't connect the dots in this simplistic way.

In the spring, they said they needed a majority in the Soviets before making their move. In September and October they had to decide whether they obtained sufficient support from the mass Soviet constituency. It was difficult to make this judgment call. In early 1918 Lenin was criticized over the Brest-Litovsk Treaty by someone comparing it to Zinoviev and Kamenev as defeatists in October. But Lenin said, in the fog of war it is difficult to judge the forces — they made a mistake, but it was understandable. Lenin understood the forces better, though of course, if we read what he was saying in the fall, he too misjudged various things.

My view is that all the Bolshevik leaders were for Soviet power. They had been working and arguing for this outcome all along, and they never budged. They did get cold feet when it came time to take over, and they pointed out all the difficulties and challenges, some real, some exaggerated. It does say something about them as leaders that they got cold feet, but it is not fundamental, not a matter of principle. It was a reading of the empirical situation.

DLJ: In the Trotskyist tradition, for example the Spartacist League, a split in the party was considered a precondition for revolution. A lot of that would be taken from *Lessons of October*. That is why I mentioned Lenin's letter to the Italian Communists. He says, it's okay if you split with them; if they leave, that's fine — they can come back later, like Kamenev and Zinoviev. What are the stakes of this history if it has been wrongly received? Of course, people have faults, but maybe it didn't reflect a break. You call this the "ironic triumph of 'old Bolshevism.'"

LTL: In *Lessons of October*, Trotsky, for his own purposes, wanted to say that the ultimate test of revolution was making the right decision at the right time, and all is for nought unless we do that. I wonder whether this is a good criterion. This makes revolutionaries that don't carry off an October pathetic people — that's a lot of revolutionaries. Trotsky himself didn't manage to make another October. I'm not sure that I like this way of looking at things.

We focus too much on what kind of people they were as individual leaders, because the Left got itself into the Trotsky-Stalin polemics, who was responsible for what, etc. What was really happening in October? In the spring, the Soviet constituency supported the agreement between the Soviet and the Provisional Government because they thought this agreement would achieve revolutionary goals. If the agreement had actually worked, it would have been great: a transformed Russia without civil war. But the mass supporters of the agreement were naïve. The agreement strategy that had been adopted since the start of the Revolution simply wasn't working. The peace talks were stuck, the economy was falling apart, the nationalities were leaving. Reading non-Bolshevik memoirs on the events in the fall, what strikes me is that everybody understood what was going on. The Kerensky government was ineffective; no one took it seriously. The Provisional Government had little legitimacy. Everyone realized that the solution in place was not working but making things worse.

On one side, among the moderate socialists and the supporters of the Provisional Government, there was complete hopelessness, gloom, and despair. They knew their way was not working but they were sure that the Bolshevik solution — Soviet power, excluding the middle class and knowledgeable people from the government — was disastrous. They thought the Bolsheviks were proposing anarchy and this government could not last a week.

That view was universal. One side was hopeless, and the other side said it was time to put up or shut up. The Bolsheviks said Soviet power was the only path forward. It was put-up-or-shut-up time. If the Bolsheviks had not carried out their own program by taking power, they would have been totally discredited. Political power was already being taken in various local places. I tend to emphasize this inevitable drive for political power. That is not to discount Lenin's great role in pushing it forward, but simply to say that Lenin's advocacy of it was not such a scandalous thing.

EC: A primary impetus for Trotsky's *Lessons of October* is the international situation. When he is writing they have just seen the failure of revolutions in Germany and Bulgaria. Things are not looking rosy for the Revolution spreading. Part of the reason he says, "If you miss the moment, you're no good" — though it can be over-emphasized — is the question of how to generalize the lessons of having seized power in October for the working class and Communist parties in Europe. There had already been the failed revolution in Germany in 1918–19, where the situation was similar to the one you were describing: workers' and soldiers' councils were established and then the Right wing of the Social Democrats were elected to the majority in those councils, and the Left, the Independents, and Spartakusbund,[22] did not know how to win a majority there. What is the significance of the failure of the Revolution to spread beyond Russia or the failed German Revolution of 1923? How do you understand that context in your assessment of Trotsky and others who were debating the meaning of the history of 1917?

LTL: You're right, we need to draw the reference to the international situation in 1924. Nevertheless, I have a cynical reading of Trotsky's motive. He was using it to discredit his leadership rivals at home. But I don't want to get into that because motive mongering is not a good style of argument. I will say, however, that Trotsky also wrote a history of the revolution in early 1918,[23] which is just as long as *Lessons of October*, and his 1918 work has a different take on the dynamics of the revolution.

EC: Wasn't *Lessons of October* published as an introduction to a collection of Trotsky's own earlier writings?

LTL: Yes. I am working on a translation of this collection. That book was published with a preface (*Lessons of October*) and an appendix (his 1918 history). We should take a look at those two and realize that they don't say the same thing — so to speak, we can't make ends meet. The introduction Trotsky provided for this book (*Lessons of October*) was not borne out by what's actually in the volume itself! I will translate all this Trotsky material into English, so that it is available and people can judge for themselves. Even those who attacked *Lessons of October* when it was first published did not look into his writing carefully. They just slammed him. They were more right about events in 1917 than he was, but only because it was more convenient for them to tell the truth in this case.

On the international question, let's start with the fact that the Bolsheviks thought the Revolution was going to spread. That was an unquestioned assumption, not only for the Bolsheviks, but for the Left Mensheviks and some of the Right Mensheviks too. I was surprised by how widespread that belief was. The Russians in general overestimated their influence and the importance of the Russian Revolution to people in Western Europe and the U.S. Many in the West did think it was important, but not as many and not as fervently as the Russians hoped. In the years following 1917 the Bolsheviks were misled by what I call the 1917 model of rapid radicalization, i.e., a rapid move to the Left and a self-discrediting of the moderates. The Mensheviks going from a majority party to nothing in a matter of months is as dramatic a story as anything else in 1917. The Bolsheviks lived through the collapse of Menshevism in 1917, and it influenced their outlook. They applied it to what they thought was going to happen. Lenin's advice in 1920 regarding the British Labour Party was, "Let the moderates take over. They'll just discredit themselves quickly." That obviously did not take place.

In 1919, Lenin gave many speeches to the Party faithful. His message was consistent throughout the year, but there was one big shift. In the first half of the year, he made amazing statements like, "Next year we will be meeting in Paris. This year is the first Congress of the Third International, but at the second there will be socialist republics everywhere." In the second half of the year, this theme disappeared from his speeches. He didn't say the opposite; he just didn't make that kind of comment anymore. He was now promising his audience, in more sober fashion, "Hang on a bit and the Civil War in Russia will be over." One thing that sobered him up was the Hungarian Revolution in August 1919. It was a process, coming to grips with the fact that the revolution was not going to take place on the timescale they hoped. As the years went on, there was more of that. 1923 should be put in that context as one more disappointment.

There was a basic misunderstanding of the situation in the West by the Bolsheviks. The Russian model of revolution was not going to happen in the West, where there were much more strongly established moderate socialist and worker organizations and democracies.

EC: You mentioned the influence of your teacher Robert Tucker and suggested, as you do in *Lenin Rediscovered*, that his understanding of Lenin didn't fall into the "textbook" interpretation. Was Tucker a Marxist or socialist in any way? How did he avoid that trap?

LTL: Another teacher of mine who avoided the trap was John Plamenatz. Neither Tucker nor Plamenatz were Leftists. Tucker worked in Russia from 1945 to 53 and married a Russian woman. Stalin did not allow such women to leave with their husbands; only after Stalin died were they able to leave. Tucker had roots in Soviet society through his wife's family, who hated Stalin. Reading *Pravda* every day in the high Stalin era was a good way to hate Stalin too. Tucker thought there was a huge chasm between Stalin and Lenin. Tucker and other teachers of mine, such as Steve Cohen, had roots in Soviet society and adopted the views of the reform tradition there. At all times in the Soviet Union, there was a tradition, which never completely faded out, of saying Lenin was great, Bukharin represented what Lenin actually stood for, while Stalin betrayed it. There was not much of a Trotskyist perspective in Soviet society itself.

EC: Jacobs mentioned earlier that the merger formula could be seen as an historical narrative of the Second International, one which you might call "presentist," in that it understood the past through the concerns of the present. The rise of the Second International made the history of the 19th century look a certain way, as if it were the history leading to the establishment and growth of the organization. The merger formula embodied that history from that standpoint. I wonder whether the Trotskyist narrative — which you also ascribe to Lukács and Korsch — about the break between the Second and Third Internationals cannot also be understood in that way. The political break was so real that the meaning of history changed. Perhaps it wasn't just a case of them having "shallow roots" in the Second International and not understanding it, but the meaning of that whole history had transformed for political reasons. How do you think about history changing based on the standpoint of the present up to today?

LTL: I completely agree. In some sense that question is for activists. They have a past, and they have a future that they are trying to move towards. It is important for them — that is where presentism comes from — to place themselves in that history. Whig history is the idea that everything is moving forward — in that case towards the triumph of parliamentary government. Something like this is inevitable if you have a political narrative. The present is the crossroads between the past and the future. I have written about how the path was a central metaphor for the Bolsheviks. You have to think of yourself as part of a tradition and on your way to accomplishing the tasks of your activism. Of course, you can say things about the past that hindered the journey along this path, but you have to ask yourself why you are interested in that.

By the time Lenin died or got so sick that he was not active, he could still say, "There was a split between revolutionary Social Democracy and opportunism. We were always on the side of revolutionary Social Democracy, but we didn't know how strong opportunism was or that opportunism would get majority votes to support the war; now we realize how we should have purged them from the beginning. That is what we are going to do with the Third International." The Third International was, in his conception, revolutionary Social Democracy without opportunism. He thought, "We can spread our wings and act freely." He could go with the cognitive dissonance of saying, "Kautsky was our great hero back then, but not now."

Lenin could handle this cognitive dissonance, but the movement as a whole couldn't. That was why the Third International saw itself as completely opposed to the Second International. It saw itself as a return to Marx — as a rejection, lock, stock and barrel, of the Second International. One way of doing this is not to say that we were mistaken about this or that, but that those opportunists were bad people. It is simpler to say that Kautsky never understood Marx. You can excuse the fact that Lenin was taken in by him for a while, but then the scales fell from Lenin's eyes, and he realized that it had been wrong to be inspired by Kautsky's writings. This became the standard, misleading narrative about Kautsky and Lenin. It's a narrative that cuts you off from your own past. This is not my narrative.

DLJ: Doesn't that say something about the contradictory character of the development of the socialist movement and Marxism? I'm thinking of a great pamphlet by Zinoviev, in which he says something like, "When we say that the leaders of the Second International betrayed the Second International, we are not saying they hatched a plan back in 1875, but rather that the circumstances made them fall down."[24] That history is what gets flattened in retrospect.

LTL: I have also cited Zinoviev saying that the Second International is our heritage and we will never renounce it. This perspective got lost. There are explanations as to why. The revolutionary Social Democratic tradition itself didn't realize that they were passing resolutions but not reflecting on the real views of the movement as a whole. Mike Taber has published two good books that present the real debates within the Second International.[25]

I am not saying that historical facts are unambiguous. I try to base my arguments on the documents, what people said, what they thought, what they were arguing about, what they took for granted and what they didn't, what the real differences were. The only way to do that is to look at the documents, and for various reasons that has not been done sufficiently. I and some other people are doing this now and it is a good thing, but a genuine debate requires people to take on those documents and say whether our conclusions are correct or not. The one unacceptable response is simply to ignore or dismiss the new evidence and the new perspectives on age-old questions. **|P**

---

[1] Lars T. Lih, "How a Founding Document was Found, or One Hundred Years of Lenin's *What is to be Done?*," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 4, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 5–49.

[2] Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered:* What Is to Be Done? *in Context* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 32.

[3] Leon Trotsky, "Hands Off Rosa Luxemburg!," *The Militant*, August 6 and 13, 1932, available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1932/06/luxemberg.htm>.

[4] Leon Trotsky, "Karl Kautsky" (November 1938), available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/11/kautsky.htm>: "The death of Karl Kautsky has passed unnoticed. To the young generation this name says comparatively little. Yet there was a time when Kautsky was in the true sense of the word the teacher who instructed the international proletarian vanguard. To be sure, his influence in the Anglo-Saxon countries, especially also in France, was less considerable; but that is explained by the feeble influence of Marxism in general in these countries. On the other hand, in Germany, in Austria, in Russia, and in the other Slavic countries, Kautsky became an indisputable Marxian authority. The attempts of the present historiography of the Comintern to present things as if Lenin, almost in his youth, had seen in Kautsky an opportunist and had declared war against him, are radically false. Almost up to the time of the world war, Lenin considered Kautsky as the genuine continuator of the cause of Marx and Engels."

[5] Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party of Germany).

[6] Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered*, 102.

[7] Lars Lih, "Lars Lih responds to: 'Did Kautsky advocate 'Leninism'?,'" *John Riddell: Marxist Essays and Commentary*, May 28, 2016, available online at <https://johnriddell.com/2016/05/28/lars-lih-responds-to-did-kautsky-advocate-leninism/>.

[8] Eric Blanc, "Party, class, and Marxism: Did Kautsky advocate 'Leninism'?," *John Riddell*, May 24, 2016, available online at <https://johnriddell.com/2016/05/24/party-class-and-marxism-did-kautsky-advocate-leninism/>.

[9] Karl Kautsky, "Sects or Class Parties" (1909), available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1909/07/unions.htm>.

[10] Lars T. Lih, *Lenin* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011).

[11] The Third International was also known as the Communist International, or "Comintern."

[12] V.I. Lenin, "On the Struggle of the Italian Socialist Party" (November 4 and 12, 1920), in *Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 31, 4th English ed. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 377–96, available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/nov/04.htm>.

[13] See Eric Blanc, "Did the Bolsheviks Advocate Socialist Revolution in 1917?," *Historical Materialism*, October 7, 2017, available at <https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/blog/did-bolsheviks-advocate-socialist-revolution-1917>.

[14] Lars T. Lih, "Supplement: Back to Nevsky!," *Weekly Worker* 1450 (July 7, 2023), available at < https://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1450/supplement-back-to-nevsky/>.

[15] Joseph Stalin, *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks)* (1938), colloquially known as the *Short Course*.

[16] See V. I. Lenin, "The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution" (also known as the April Theses) (1917), in *Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 24 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), 19–26, available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/apr/04.htm>.

[17] See Lars Lih, "The ironic triumph of 'old Bolshevism,'" *Weekly Worker* 843 (November 25, 2010), available online at <https://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/843/the-ironic-triumph-of-old-bolshevism/>; Lars Lih, "October 1917: the ironic triumph of 'old Bolshevism," presented at the London Communist Forum in 2010, hosted by the Communist Party of Great Britain, available online at <https://vimeo.com/17271793>; Lars Lih, "The Ironic Triumph of Old Bolshevism: The Debates of April 1917 in Context," *Russian History* 38, no. 2 (2011): 199–242; and Lars Lih, "The ironic triumph of 'old Bolshevism,'" *John Riddell*, June 1, 2015, available online at <https://johnriddell.com/2015/06/01/lars-lih-the-ironic-triumph-of-old-bolshevism/>.

[18] See V. I. Lenin, "Letters from Afar" (1917), in *Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 23 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), 295–342, available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/lfafar/index.htm>.

[19] Lars T. Lih, "Supplement: Thirteen to two?," *Weekly Worker* 1165 (July 27, 2017), available online at <https://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1165/supplement-thirteen-to-two/>.

[20] V. I. Lenin, "The Dual Power" (April 1917), in *Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 24, 38–41, available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/apr/09.htm>.

[21] See Hal Draper, "The Myth of Lenin's 'Revolutionary Defeatism,'" published as a three-part series in *New International*, XIX, no. 5 (September–October 1953), XIX, no. 6 (November–December 1953), and XX, no. 1 (January–February 1954), available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1953/defeat/index.htm>.

[22] Spartacus League, not to be confused with the Spartacist League.

[23] See Leon Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution to Brest-Litovsk* (1918), available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1918/hrr/index.htm>.

[24] See Gregory Zinoviev, *The Social Roots of Opportunism* (1916), available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/zinoviev/works/1916/war/opp-index.htm>.

[25] See *Under the Socialist Banner: Resolutions of the Second International, 1889–1912*, ed. Mike Taber (Chicago: Haymarket, 2021) and *Reform, Revolution, and Opportunism: Debates in the Second International, 1900–1910*, ed. Mike Taber (Chicago: Haymarket, 2023).

DLJ: In his article "Hands Off Rosa Luxemburg!" (1932),[3] Trotsky says Kautsky has now been turned into something completely separate by Stalin, as opposed to being Lenin's great teacher. Trotsky repeats this point several years later in his obituary for Kautsky.[4]

To return to *Lenin Rediscovered*, while Lenin and Kautsky are usually opposed, you argue that there is a deep "Erfurtianism" to Lenin. You write, "The *Erfurt Programme* tells an idealised version of the story of the SPD[5] — past, present and future — as a confirmation of the predictions of the *Communist Manifesto*. In this way, it strengthens the authoritative status both of the *Manifesto* and the SPD model. The merger formula — 'Social Democracy is the merger of socialism and the worker movement' — pulls all Kautsky's various arguments together."[6] To what degree can the merger formula be considered an account of the Second International? In a sense it was an expression of lateness. Marx and Engels were already trying to merge the workers' movement with socialism.

LTL: Trotksy's "Hands Off" states well one half of the truth — Lenin's admiration for Kautsky before the war — but obscures the other half — Lenin's continued admiration for Kautsky's prewar writings.

Lenin Rediscovered focuses on the period prior to 1905; it does not spend much time on the idea of hegemony, which was based on tactical conclusions from the later experience of 1905. Again, Kautsky was central there. If you could read one document to understand Bolshevism, it would be Kautsky's pamphlet *The Driving Forces and Prospects of the Russian Revolution* (1907). Lenin, Stalin, and Trotsky all raved about it.

The merger formula is more basic. Even the opportunists were trying to bring about this merger. It was the idea of trying to make socialism an active force in the world. For me, the central thrust of Marx and Engels is not any particular view of what socialism is, but the vision of the working class as the force that would bring socialism into reality —but you had to get the working class to understand this mission and to carry it out. Marx and Engels, and the generation immediately following, faced a workers' movement on the one hand, fighting for a better deal, and socialism on the other, largely confined to intellectuals and revolutionaries. Their purpose was to bring these two together. The workers would adopt the ideas of the intellectuals, and the intellectuals would adopt the militant class outlook of the workers. The SPD seemed to have carried out a successful merger: it was a mass party with a radical program.

If socialism and the workers' movement do not merge, what do we have? Sectarianism and reformism. The isolated intellectuals say we should have this or that wonderful world, and the isolated workers try to get a better deal for their families. In 1910, it looked like things in the SPD were falling apart again and the merger was disintegrating. That led to the split between the reformist wing and the revolutionary wing. The question I have is, did they ever get back together? Did we ever get a mass *and* revolutionary party? Or did we have revolutionaries on the one hand and mass parties on the other? Russia was a different case because the Bolsheviks took control of the state. Only in brief moments can we say that the two ever came together in Europe. I'm not talking about China or Vietnam.

Does the merger formula apply to us today? I have two questions here. First, is there any merger going on or in the offing? Second, is it a good perspective? If you abandon the perspective that you want this merger to happen, you are getting out of the Marxist tradition, or at least what was central to Marx and Engels.

EC: In that period up to 1910, the British Labour Party played a key role in debates on the merger formula in the Second International. In 2016 you wrote a response[7] to Eric Blanc's essay that asked, "Did Kautsky advocate 'Leninism'?,"[8] itself a response to Kautsky's "Sects or Class Parties."[9] You said that, at the time Kautsky and Lenin thought the merger formula was almost inevitable, but from today's perspective we can see that was far from the case. The split between sectarians and reformists, where the Marxists were isolated, which was the British situation at the time, became the norm. What do you make of that?

LTL: I have little knowledge of the Labour Party, but I will suggest a way of thinking about how we have changed our attitude towards these things. I mentioned the term hegemony. In the Soviet experience, hegemony was a very optimistic word: "workers are already on our side and they can even lead other classes." Today, hegemony is used in a gloomy way: "*they* have hegemony, and this explains why we haven't even managed to get the workers on our side." That split in the meaning of hegemony tells the story of a lack of faith that the merger can happen any time soon. That was why people found it reasonable to think that Lenin was pessimistic about the merger and hegemony; people today on the Left themselves are pessimistic about it.

DLJ: In the late 2000s and early 2010s there was a resurrection of Kautsky, of which your work seems to be part, sometimes called "neo-Kautskyism," though perhaps that is too neat. Lenin's relationship to Kautsky was rediscovered in the Millennial Left moment. What factors were part of that recovery, or why was it ideologically blocked earlier? Were there any earlier precursors to your work?

LTL: Moira Donald's *Marxism and Revolution: Karl Kautsky and the Russian Marxists 1900–1924* (1993) got me started on this. It was a pioneering book. There were other Kautsky books at that time, including one by his grandson, John Kautsky. Donald's book was the first not to say that Lenin represented wild Russians and Kautsky represented sane but overly ideological Germans. That had been a convenient standpoint for academics and Trotskyists. People don't go beyond the standard one-liners used to define Kautsky. When they do, what they find in his writings is different. I'm not sure why people started getting into Kautsky at that time. Perhaps people started reading his actual texts. By now, luckily, there is a much greater corpus of Kautsky's writings available in English.

On "neo-Kautskyism," I am not saying we should all admire Kautsky; I am saying that Lenin had a high view of the prewar Kautsky, a view which he never changed. That is a fact, so we should acknowledge and explain it. I am not a Kautsky expert; I'm an expert on Lenin on Kautsky. I am giving you Lenin's view of Kautsky, not mine. Lenin was a world-class expert on Kautsky. No one except Kautsky's wife had read and understood so much Kautsky. So, we should listen to what Lenin says. I am not saying we should go back to that.

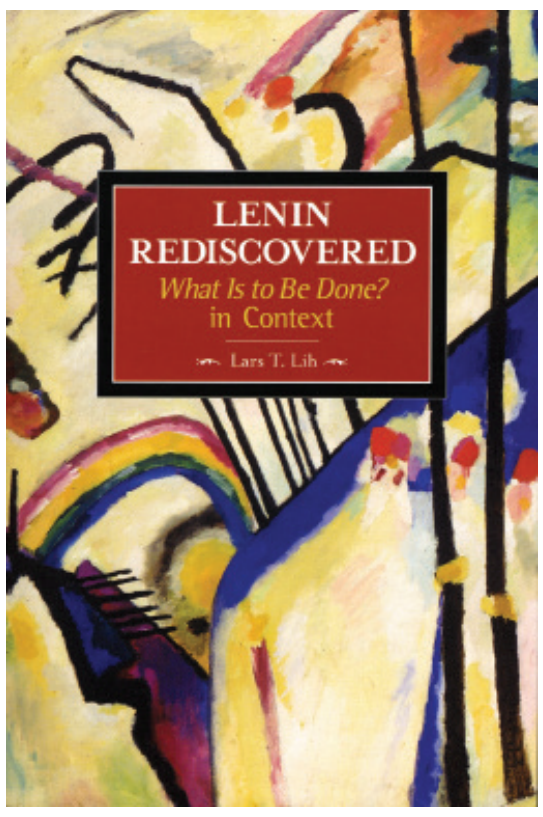
Some people get angry with me for saying something different from the established narrative. Other people say, "We all know that Kautsky was a moderate, and Lih says Lenin followed Kautsky; therefore Lih says Lenin was a moderate." I am not saying that. I am saying that in his prime, Kautsky was a lot more radical than you think. I try to read everything by Kautsky that Lenin mentions. I aim to see Kautsky through Lenin's eyes.

In my short biography of Lenin,[10] I identify three stages in Lenin's career and give them appropriate labels: the merger formula (Social Democracy), the idea of hegemony as a political strategy for Russian Social Democrats (Bolshevism), and a picture of the world as a whole, the global view of revolutions (Communism). Looking at the prewar writings of Lenin and Bolsheviks such as Kamenev, they didn't talk much about global dynamics, but when they did, they adopted ideas from Kautsky. The East was rising, and though the people in the global East (an expression that was broader then than now) were not socialists yet, we Western socialists should support them. We should support national revolutions because they made democratic demands for self-determination. What happens in Russia will have a huge impact on Western Europe. All those ideas were already there in Kautsky and revolutionary Social Democracy. One day I will write a book about this. It is a fascinating and unexpected story. Perhaps I shall call it *The Frenemies* [Lenin and Kautsky] *That Set the Agenda for the 20th Century*.

DLJ: There were people in the 1960s who would draw a connection between Lenin and Kautsky in order to dismiss Lenin. But in the 2010s the identity was to be recovered as a source of revolutionary tradition, from the debates in *Jacobin* with Eric Blanc and Chris Maisano to Mike Macnair. What changed ideologically from the New Left to the Millennial Left that made that reception of Kautsky more affirmative?

LTL: The obvious thing that comes to mind is the fall of the Soviet Union. Having said that, I am at a loss as to how to connect the dots. It's worth thinking about. The mainstream Left somehow got to a position where it was dismissing the Marxist tradition, saying, "Marx was right, but Engels was already on a bad path and every prominent Marxist afterwards misunderstood Marx." So, this recovery is partly trying to say, "Let's not be so dismissive of the Marxist tradition." If the Marxists got everything wrong, it is not a good look for Marx himself. One of his basic propositions was that people would understand him and carry out his ideas because he was pointing out reality. He did not have the idea that there were forces keeping people from understanding him.

EC: It seems some in the New Left, who said Engels didn't understand Marx or that the Second International applied Marxism mechanically, were trying to think about how historical-political circumstances had changed. While there were new tasks for them, still Marx spoke to their moment. How is it possible that through great historical changes Marx, as this enigmatic figure, still speaks to the present? Wasn't there a political optimism or chutzpah to that New Leftism, which the more recent recovery of Kautsky lacks? The latter seems to have lower horizons, is more pessimistic and less iconoclastic.



The cover of Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered:* What is to be Done? *in Context* (Chicago: Haymarket: 2008)

LTL: Yes, that is clear. The two go together. A knowledgeable understanding of the past means being aware of the differences. We can't take the lessons and apply them today. It might be that you only get interested in the past when you are not out on the barricades, as they were in the 60s.

There was at that time the discovery of the "young Marx" and a sense of excitement about discovering those writings. Marx had good luck. When it looked like he was becoming obsolete around 1910, the Russian Revolution happened. When it looked like he was becoming obsolete because of Stalinism, we had the new humanist Marxism based on the early writings.

Marx is large. He contains multitudes. Even anti-Marxists realize that. The heart of Marx as a revolutionary was the idea of the world-historical mission of the working class. I wonder whether people still have that idea. There is now pessimism and lowered horizons. I wonder whether people feel that there is a specific class of people who will understand how to remake the world and then go out and do it. There are lots of things going on, people becoming more militant, but do we have what they had in 1905 due to the Second International or later in the Comintern?[11] I will not answer that question. The merger formula was one episode of that world-historical epic. The workers will get the message, then they will have a revolution, take over society, become the political power, and remake society in a socialist way. That was the story.

EC: It struck me as peculiar that you described Lenin as an expert on Kautsky. Lenin would have considered himself a revolutionary Marxist, so of course he read everything by Kautsky. But he was a political figure. In the absence of that world-historical mission you describe, is it possible to see through Lenin's eyes and understand Kautsky the way he did?

LTL: We have to try. We want to understand how Lenin saw the world. Certainly, I cannot share many of the foundations of his faith. In 1917, he got one thing right — the unworkability of coalition politics — which many others got wrong, but he himself also got an awful lot wrong. He thought the revolution was going to spread to western Europe immediately, and it did not. This failure caused a big change of plans and perspective. However, we can listen to him and the people around him. Lenin was all the things you said, but he was also a bookworm, an intellectual, and a polemicist. We can approach him from that angle too.

The three top Bolsheviks — not including Trotsky, who wasn't a Bolshevik until 1917 — Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin, wrote a ton before and after the Revolution. I learned a lot about Lenin from all three. That very fact makes me suspect to many people. But if you read just Lenin, you are not sure what is part of Bolshevism and what is his individual take on things. He had lots of ideas. You can learn more about Bolshevism from the other people who were propagandizing. Lenin endorsed that; he kept them on and, for the most part, didn't say they misunderstood him on basic questions. My new book *What Was Bolshevism?*, though the first essay is on Lenin, focuses more on Bukharin, Zinoviev, and Stalin. Like it or not, these people were spokesmen of Bolshevism and its message. They were not stupid people or counter-revolutionaries. You have to take them seriously as dedicated and understanding Bolsheviks. I should mention that my new book examines a wide range of voices on Bolshevism: not only political leaders, but novelists, songwriters, and filmmakers.

DLJ: In some articles on April 1917, you talked about the "myth" of "rearming the party." There is a standard account in which Lenin comes back to Russia, while Zinoviev and Kamenev come out in the bourgeois press two weeks before. Lenin wrote to the Italian Communists in 1920 to the effect that Kamenev and Zinoviev were not bad people but this showed something about the crisis of the party.[12] You have also written about Lenin's *State and Revolution* (1917), where you argue that he may agree more with Kautsky on the state. What was driving Lenin to be, at times, at odds with his party? You have said that people perhaps misunderstood each other, but Lenin holds onto the view that Kautsky's opportunism represented something real about the International and the need to split. Could you talk about why you felt Lenin understood what he did in 1917? What do you see as the stakes of this, and how is it received in the 20th and 21st centuries?

LTL: On "rearming," I try to go through documents that were overlooked or unknown, which need to be taken into account and put into circulation. Those who object to the perspective put forward by Eric Blanc[13] and I have not yet been able to come up with an alternative perspective that takes into account these documents or the available material as a whole. Eric and I are on the same side essentially, not because we are "neo-Kautskyans," but because we have looked at the documents.

The standard story is long and complicated. Because I am saying everyone is wrong about that, I have to come up with a powerful story as to why. One answer is that not everyone is wrong. That was the point of my article on Vladimir Nevsky.[14] He was not the only one. There is a counter-tradition from Nevsky through to late Soviet historians. I am not a voice crying in the wilderness.

Trotsky came up with the phrase "rearming" circa 1922. It is a vivid but misleading way of stating things. Not only the Trotskyists use it. The perspective implied by the term was taken over by academics like Alexander Rabinowitch, the author of the standard works on Bolshevism and 1917. Rabinowitch relied on a neo-Trotskyist framework of a split within the Bolshevik Party over fundamental issues. Even Stalin and the Stalinist historiography employ a perspective of what I call "rearming lite." If you look at Stalin's *Short Course* on party history, this famous textbook says Lenin came back with some new theoretical points, even though the textbook doesn't go so far as to say that he revolutionized the party.[15] It was part of the cult of Lenin to credit Lenin with new and outstanding insights.

The first fundamental expression of this was in Trotsky's *Lessons of October* (1924). I am working on a project to translate all of Trotsky's writings from 1917, which to my surprise has not been done by the Trotskyists. These writings will show that he had quite a different view of the Revolution in 1917 than he did looking back in 1924. In 1924, his motives were to burnish his Leninist credentials and delegitimize those of his rivals.

Trotsky said the other Bolsheviks were not imaginative or intelligent; they didn't understand what was going on in Russia. They applied Lenin's prewar writings mechanically and therefore came up with a reformist position. But then Lenin came back and understood that Trotsky had been right all along. What was needed was not old Bolshevism but "old Trotskyism," i.e., the perspective of "permanent revolution." Lenin's new stand caused a split within the Bolsheviks over fundamental questions, and so the October Revolution happened despite most of the Bolshevik leaders. This is the "rearming" perspective in a nutshell.

That is a paradoxical and weird account. But we are so used to it that it doesn't sound paradoxical. When I say that Lenin, Kamenev, Zinoviev, Stalin, and Trotsky were a team working together, I sound paradoxical, even though for non-specialists this sounds like the commonsense view.

Lenin's return and his presentation of the April Theses[16] were dramatic events. Sukhanov has a famous vivid description. In response to this standard view, I wrote on "the ironic triumph of 'old Bolshevism.'"[17] I was working on a hunch, and there were many things I didn't fully understand then. After writing the article, people recalled some famous anecdotes, and I was challenged on why the Bolsheviks didn't publish Lenin's "Letters from Afar,"[18] the 13-2 vote against him, and the brouhaha over the April Theses with Kamenev. Those are good questions, but I have good answers. I am the only person to have looked at the real cuts to the printed version of Lenin's "Letters from Afar." Essentially, they eliminated stuff that was out of date because he wrote them two weeks earlier — a long time in a revolution. They did not gut his message. Furthermore, you can see the influence of his Letters in *Pravda* and resolutions that were passed by the Party leadership in March. Then there is the idea that the Petrograd Party Committee rejected the April Theses, 13 to 2. But when I read the debates, more than two people expressed approval, so something is wrong there. For the fascinating details, see my essay on this episode.[19]

Here's the basic fact about the April Theses: you cannot say you are for or against them as a whole, because they are lots of things. If you do not disaggregate them, if you do not look at each separate issue, you are communicating nothing about how people reacted to them at the time. That eliminates about 90% of writing on the topic.

DLJ: One Bolshevik accused Lenin of being "senile," saying, "You've been out of Russia too long."

LTL: There are ten April Theses, and there are even more separate issues. Some were standard Bolshevik messaging. Others sounded more radical at first hearing than they were. Some were quietly dropped. For example, the Theses say, let's move away from the longtime Bolshevik emphasis on the peasantry as a whole and move towards the agricultural proletariat, getting farms or communes for them. That radical change of emphasis sounded crazy to people, and it more or less was. The Bolsheviks had always said they had to get the peasants on their side. Lenin didn't deny that, but he wanted to shift the center of gravity to the non-peasants in the countryside. He was hurrying things. That is what was behind the specific comment you mentioned about Lenin being "out of touch." I make that distinction because they thought that once Lenin had been in Russia for a while, he would get it. Essentially, that is what happened. Through the Civil War period, Lenin became more and more discouraged with the possibility of moving rapidly towards socialism in the countryside by way of communes and the like.

That was one plank in the Theses about which people had misgivings. Other aspects aroused no such misgivings. No one said the war was not imperialist or that Bolsheviks should support the Provisional Government. Stalin and Kamenev, the top leaders before Lenin's return, had already been saying that the government was counter-revolutionary, the war was imperialist, and that so-called "revolutionary defensism" was a trap. It is all there in the record, but historians are reluctant to look at the available evidence. I call this attitude studied indifference. Many historians are simply not interested enough to find out — or perhaps they would rather not find out.

DLJ: I will give the standard account. In "Letters from Afar," Lenin responds to *Pravda* editorials arguing for supporting the Provisional Government in order to force it to negotiate and then demonstrate that the war is imperialist. Kamenev and Stalin were not defensist explicitly, but had more of a pre-1917 line. Lenin says sarcastically that it would be like the village priest urging the landlords and merchants to walk in the way of God. Lenin might not say they were defensist but that there was inertia. It is similar to the line he takes from Kautsky at the start of the war: Kautsky said that if opportunism ever goes from being a sentiment to a tendency, a split would be necessary. There was a reason why there was inertia within the Bolshevik Party itself. It says something about there being a revolutionary situation.

LTL: You did a good job of describing the standard story. The further I go, the more qualms I have with it. First, "Letters from Afar" was not a response to *Pravda*. They were written before Stalin and Kamenev even got there. Lenin in Switzerland did not have access to *Pravda*. We are told that he arrived, saw the papers, and said, "What have you guys been writing?" But what did he get mad at? He got mad at the fact that they were using terms such as "demand," "put pressure on," and "control." This was the sort of thing that led to his remark about the village priest (this remark is not in the "Letters," but elsewhere). But we know Lenin criticized the use of the term "demand" in *Pravda* — not from any written published documents, but in what people wrote down that Lenin said when he first arrived.

We tend to assume that the April Theses were protesting against *Pravda* articles. But how do we know that? Let's look at the issue of "demand." You gave the "village priest" quote that sums up Lenin's point of view: you cannot demand that people be different from who they are. There is no point making demands in such cases; it leads to illusions. How did the Bolsheviks understand "demands" before and after Lenin? Did they think, we can make a demand and we hope the Provisional Government

"An interview with Lars T. Lih" continues on page 3